ENG 217
Sexuality and Ethics, sec. 01

Fall 2026
MW 9:35 am – 10:50 am
EN D264

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Hours: MW 8:30 am – 9:30-am in my office; TTH 3 – 4:30 pm on Zoom

Course Description

This course examines how contemporary literature represents the ethical problems arising from sexuality, intimacy, gender, family, violence, illness, and historical memory. Rather than treating sexuality as exclusively private or somehow "apart," we will consider how desire is shaped by political institutions, religious traditions, economic conditions, racial and gender hierarchies, medical crises, war, and inherited histories.

The readings move from the AIDS crisis in Chicago and its aftermath to contemporary transgender life and non-traditional family formation, an imagined political transformation of France, civil conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, working-class gangland Dublin, and the legacy of the Holocaust in postwar Netherlands. These contexts are not interchangeable. Comparison will therefore require both attention to connection and respect for historical and cultural difference and uniqueness.

Attention to literary form, which cannot be understood apart from plot, character and theme, is central to the course. We will study narration, chronology, dramatic performance, satire, genre, voice, dialogue, and point of view as forces that shape ethical judgment. The works selected for this course do not offer simple moral fables.

They do not satisfy yearnings for black and white judgments or solutions. They ask how understanding, sympathy, accountability, and justice can coexist when characters and institutions are morally compromised.

Central Course Questions

- How do historical and institutional forces shape supposedly private desires?
- What distinguishes consent from accommodation, compromise, coercion, or submission?
- What obligations arise from sex, love, family, caregiving, and shared vulnerability?
- How do communities decide whose bodies and relationships deserve protection?
- Can intimacy contribute to historical repair, or does justice demand something beyond intimacy?

Learning Goals

Careful, current, and critical reading is the foundation of every course goal. “Careful” means attending to exact language and form; “current” means testing interpretations against up-to-date, credible historical and scholarly knowledge rather than relying on inherited assumptions; and “critical” means questioning a text’s framing, one’s own first response, and the social conditions that make particular meanings possible.

- Read primary texts closely, accurately, and in full, using specific passages rather than plot summary as the basis of interpretation.
- Consult current, credible contextual and scholarly material and distinguish it from unsupported commentary, outdated assumptions, and algorithmic summaries.
- Analyze literary representations of sexuality, gender, intimacy, care, violence, and ethical responsibility.
- Explain how history, race, class, religion, illness, gender, and political power shape sexual choices and intimate relationships.
- Distinguish among consent, coercion, accommodation, submission, and constrained choice.

- Analyze how narration, chronology, genre, satire, dialogue, and dramatic staging direct or unsettle moral judgment.
- Compare culturally distinct works without flattening their differences.
- Develop arguable claims supported by precise textual evidence and revise interpretations when new evidence requires it.
- Participate in difficult conversations with intellectual courage, generosity, and accountability.

Required Works—available in the SCSU Bookstore or at amazon.com or alternate online venues. Nota bene: You must purchase all the required works for this class at the beginning of the semester.

1. Rebecca Makkai, *The Great Believers*

A dual-timeline novel connecting Chicago during the AIDS crisis with Paris thirty years later. It establishes the course's vocabulary of chosen family, medical vulnerability, care, grief, art, and the responsibilities arising from the need to preserve and transmit historical memory.

2. Torrey Peters, *Detransition, Baby*

A formally inventive novel about Reese, Ames, Katrina, pregnancy, detransition, and the possibility of an unconventional family. It turns Makkai's concern with trans/gay/lesbian survival toward reproduction, parenthood, and futurity.

3. Michel Houellebecq, *Submission*, trans. Lorin Stein

A provocative political satire narrated by an alienated French academic for whom traditional Western freedoms have lost their meaning. Its vision of regulated gender roles and patriarchal family provides a sharp counterpoint to Peter's negotiated non-traditional kinship.

4. Lynn Nottage, *Ruined*

A play set in a bar and brothel during the current civil conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It exposes the bodily violence and constrained choices that can lie beneath sexual and economic arrangements.

5. Djamel White, *All Them Dogs*

A Dublin crime novel joining class, masculine reputation, violence, loyalty, and gay desire. It shifts the analysis of patriarchy toward the ways masculinity disciplines and damages men.

6. Yael van der Wouden, *The Safekeep*

A postwar Dutch novel in which lesbian desire, domestic possession, Holocaust memory, and restitution converge around the question of who can or cannot claim legitimate possession of an inherited

house. It returns the course to historical legacies and asks what ethical repair requires.

Edition and Reading Note

You may use print or electronic editions but you must bring the assigned text to every class. Chapter and section numbers govern assignments; page numbers differ across formats. *All Them Dogs* labels its divisions as sections. *Ruined* is assigned by act and scene.

Assessment and Grade Distribution

Requirement	Timing	Weight
Six in-class short writings	6 × 5%	30%
In-class midterm	October 21	18%
In-class cumulative final	December 2	22%
Attendance, preparation, and participation	Ongoing	15%
Self-reflective essay	December 2	15%
TOTAL		**100%**

Assessment Requirements and Descriptions

Six In-Class Short Writings - 30%

One short in-class writing assignment will accompany each primary work. Each is worth 5% and will normally occupy approximately 35 minutes of class time. You will respond to a passage-based prompt and develop a focused interpretive claim supported by textual evidence. Books may be used unless I announce otherwise; notes, internet access, messaging, and generative AI may not be used.

In-Class Midterm - 18%

The October 21 midterm covers *The Great Believers, Detransition, Baby*, and *Submission*. You will complete comparative close readings and synthesis during the 75-minute class period.

In-Class Cumulative Final - 22%

The December 2 final covers all six works and emphasizes comparison, literary form, and the development of the course's central ethical questions. The final in-class exam is 120 minutes long.

Self-Reflective Essay - 15%

Due December 2 by midnight. Required length 5-6 double spaced pages using a standard 12-point font. You will examine how your reading practices and ethical reasoning changed during the course, using specific examples from in-class writing and at least three primary works. You will also address issues around what you learned and what this means for you going forward. This is reflective analysis, not a course evaluation or plot summary.

Attendance, Preparation, and Participation - 15%

This grade reflects consistent attendance, punctuality, completion of assigned reading, possession of the text, passage annotations, substantive listening, contributions to discussion and group work, and respectful engagement with an array of perspectives. Frequent speaking is not the only form of participation; careful listening, written preparation, and small-group contributions also matter.

Course Policies

Attendance and punctuality

Because the course meets only twice each week and includes eight in-class assessments, attendance is essential. Up to three absences may occur without an automatic grade penalty; beginning with the fourth, the participation grade will drop by one grade. Repeated lateness or early departure (unless allowed) will count as a partial absence. You need not disclose private medical details but should communicate promptly when an absence affects coursework.

Missed in-class writing or examination

A missed in-class assessment may be made up only for a documented university-approved absence or another circumstance accepted by me. You must contact me as soon as reasonably

possible. Make-up assessments will use different passages or prompts while testing the same skills. Travel plans, ordinary work conflicts, or failure to prepare do not justify a make-up.

Preparation and reading

You are expected to complete the assigned chapters before class, annotate at least two significant passages, and bring one genuine interpretive question to class. Summaries, videos, and AI-generated accounts do not substitute for reading the assigned work. Preparation means being able to locate and discuss exact passages.

Respectful discussion

Question claims and interpretations rather than classmates. Do not ask anyone to represent an entire identity or community and avoid presuming to do so yourself. Having a certain identity or belonging to a certain identity group may contribute to your knowledge or investment but does not in itself constitute absolute authority or the power to act as a "gatekeeper" over matters concerning that identity. People who are not, for example, lesbian (or gay or transgender and so forth) may have valuable/valid insights and observations. Do not assume another person's sexuality, gender, religion, race, health, or history; use requested names and pronouns; distinguish analyzing prejudice from endorsing it; and allow others to finish speaking. "Offensive" or "problematic" may begin an observation, but analysis must explain how language, form, and context produce that judgment.

Academic integrity

All work must accurately represent your own reading and reasoning. Plagiarism, invented quotations or citations, unauthorized collaboration, submitting another person's work as your own, or relying on a summary instead of the assigned text violates academic integrity and will result in automatic failure.

Generative AI and digital tools

Generative AI, internet search, messaging, and stored notes are prohibited during all in-class assessments. The self-reflective essay must represent your own reflection and prose; AI may not draft,

rewrite, or generate its content. Outside assessment settings, AI may be used only when the instructor explicitly authorizes a defined activity. Any authorized use must be disclosed, and you remain responsible for accuracy. Accessibility technologies approved by the institution are not restricted by this policy.

Devices

Laptops and tablets may be used for course texts, note-taking, or assigned activities. Unrelated browsing, messaging, and social media are not permitted. Phones should be silenced and put away except for an approved activity or accommodation.

Privacy and recording

Students may discuss course ideas outside class but may not identify classmates or circulate personal disclosures. Audio or video recording require my permission unless authorized as an accommodation.

Unit Questions and Major Issues

Unit I - *The Great Believers*

- How do illness and stigma reorganize intimacy and community?
- Who counts as family when biological and chosen relationships conflict?
- What obligations do survivors have to the dead and to the living?
- How do art, photography, and narrative preserve or reshape historical memory?

Unit II - *Detransition, Baby*

- Can unconventional family be created through negotiation?
- How do transition and detransition complicate stable narratives of identity?
- What is the difference between wanting to care and being prepared to care?
- How do race, class, and cisgender privilege complicate queer solidarity?

Unit III - *Submission*

- How does private dissatisfaction become political passivity?
- Why can hierarchy and restricted freedom become attractive?
- How should readers distinguish narrator, satire, and authorial position?
- How does regulated family contrast with the negotiated kinship in Peters?

Unit IV - *Ruined*

- What does consent mean when available choices are radically constrained?
- Can Mama Nadi's establishment be refuge and exploitation simultaneously?
- What are the ethical risks of staging sexual trauma?
- Can survival require actions that resist simple moral classification?

Unit V - *All Them Dogs*

- How do class and masculine reputation limit possible selves?
- Why do tenderness and violence become entangled?
- Can narration humanize a perpetrator without excusing him?
- Where should responsibility fall when choice is structurally constrained?

Unit VI - *The Safekeep*

- How are lesbian desire, domestic possession, and historical memory connected?
- What obligations accompany inherited benefit?
- Why is acknowledgment insufficient without restitution?
- Can intimacy repair historical injury, and what must be relinquished first?

Course Calendar

Complete the listed reading before class. Assessment dates are fixed unless officially revised. "Ch." means chapter; *All Them Dogs* uses numbered sections; *Ruined* uses acts and scenes.

Week 1 - Entering the Course

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Wed Aug 26	No primary reading. Obtain The Great Believers.	Course orientation; sexuality as an ethical and literary problem; consent, care, coercion, vulnerability, historical location; distinguishing author, narrator, and character. Diagnostic close-reading exercise.

Week 2 - The Great Believers: Community and Crisis

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Aug 31	The Great Believers, chs. 1-7	Funeral and exclusion; biological and chosen family; AIDS as medical and social crisis; alternating chronology. Ask: Who has authority to define family?
Wed Sep 2	The Great Believers, chs. 8-15	Fear, testing, disclosure, sexual risk; art and preservation; institutional neglect. Ask: What responsibilities exist when medical knowledge is incomplete?

Week 3 - Risk, Knowledge, and Stigma

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Sep 7	NO CLASS - Labor Day	No meeting.

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Wed Sep 9	The Great Believers, chs. 16-23	Stigma, fidelity, rumor, and unequal access to knowledge. In-class Short Writing 1 (35 minutes), followed by passage-based discussion.

Week 4 - Care and Survivorhood

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Sep 14	The Great Believers, chs. 24-31	Care labor, gender, anger, exhaustion, and survivor guilt. Ask: Who cares for caregivers, and when can care become controlling?
Wed Sep 16	The Great Believers, chs. 32-39	Intergenerational trauma; Fiona and Claire; photography, memory, and public history. Ask: Can devotion to the dead become a failure toward the living?

Week 5 - Memory and Ethical Inheritance

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Sep 21	NO CLASS - Yom Kippur	No meeting.
Wed Sep 23	The Great Believers, chs. 40-46; finish novel	Reconciliation, testimony, art as memorial, and unresolved responsibility. Synthesis workshop connecting memory, care, and ethical inheritance.

Week 6 - Detransition, Baby: Identity and Futurity

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Sep 28	Detransition, Baby, chs. 1-3	Reese, Ames/Amy, Katrina; transition and detransition; gender identity versus social role; motherhood and comic form.
Wed Sep 30	Detransition, Baby, chs. 4-6	Shared history, trans community, dangerous intimacy, and inherited scripts. Compare trans community with The Great Believers.

Week 7 - Negotiating Family

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Oct 5	Detransition, Baby, chs. 7-9	Pregnancy, disclosure, race, class, heterosexual privilege, parenthood as labor; limits of negotiated kinship.
Wed Oct 7	Detransition, Baby, chs. 10-11; finish novel	Ambivalence, family, care, and reproductive futurity. In-class Short Writing 2 (35 minutes), then comparison: chosen family under death versus around birth.

Week 8 - Submission: Desire and Political Passivity

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Oct 12	Submission, chs. 1-2	François, alienation, sexual consumption, academia, cultural exhaustion; satire and unreliable perspective.

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Wed Oct 14	Submission, chs. 3-4	Political transformation; secularism, religion, national identity; women's removal from public institutions; passivity and complicity.

Week 9 - Submission and Midterm

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Oct 19	Submission, ch. 5; finish novel	Conversion as bargain; patriarchy, polygamy, professional reward, freedom and comfort. In-class Short Writing 3 (35 minutes).
Wed Oct 21	Review The Great Believers, Detransition, Baby, and Submission	IN-CLASS MIDTERM (75 minutes). Comparative close reading and synthesis; no new reading.

Week 10 - Ruined: Refuge, Commerce, and War

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Oct 26	Ruined, Act I, scenes 1-3	Dramatic form; Mama Nadi's establishment; refuge and exploitation; war economy; representation of sexual violence.
Wed Oct 28	Ruined, Act I, scenes 4-6; Act II, scenes 1-2	Trauma, testimony, gendered stigma, masculinity, and the limits of neutrality. Performance and staging exercise.

Week 11 - Ruined and All Them Dogs

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Nov 2	Ruined, Act II, scenes 3-7; finish play	Survival, moral compromise, repair, endurance, and the ending. In-class Short Writing 4 (35 minutes).
Wed Nov 4	All Them Dogs, sections 1-5	Tony's return; first-person voice; class, neighborhood, criminal identity, loyalty, and moral proximity.

Week 12 - All Them Dogs: Masculinity and Vulnerability

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Nov 9	All Them Dogs, sections 6-10	Tony and Flute; homoeroticism, repression, shame, violence as communication, loyalty as displaced intimacy.
Wed Nov 11	All Them Dogs, sections 11-15	Escalating violence, desire and danger, structural constraint, aggression, victimhood, and perpetration.

Week 13 - Consequence and Historical Possession

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Nov 16	All Them Dogs, sections 16-19; finish novel	Responsibility, fatalism, queer tragedy, and crime genre. In-class Short Writing 5 (35 minutes).
Wed Nov 18	The Safekeep, chs. 1-5	Isabel, Eva, the house, domestic order, possession, suspicion, repression, and objects as memory.

Week 14 - Desire and Disruption

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Nov 23	The Safekeep, chs. 6-10	Sexual awakening; hostility and attraction; altered self-knowledge; what intimacy reveals and conceals.
Wed Nov 25	NO CLASS - Thanksgiving recess	No meeting.

Week 15 - Restitution and Synthesis

Date	Reading due	Discussion / in-class work
Mon Nov 30	The Safekeep, chs. 11-14; finish novel	Historical revelation; Holocaust memory; inherited benefit, guilt, responsibility, property, and restitution. In-class Short Writing 6 (35 minutes).
Wed Dec 2	Review all six works; self-reflective essay due by 11:59 p.m.	IN-CLASS CUMULATIVE FINAL (120 minutes): comparative analysis of sexuality, inequality, literary form, and ethical responsibility.